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Nina Power, Lucy Sparling, W. Xiao & Morita Seiya

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Contents

“I’m not sure that we are modern”	3
Becoming an activist	3
Warwick University and CCRU	4
Shifts in the politics of the Left in the 2000s	5
2010s, the UK student movement	7
A downturn	8
Corbyn, etc.	10
One dimensional woman	12
New needs and history	14
Politics from another angle	16
Reviving politics	21
The dialectic of the core and the periphery	24
Staff	31
Statement of purpose	32
Submission Guidelines	33
The <i>Platypus Review</i> is funded by	33
About the Platypus Affiliated Society	33

‘I’m not sure that we are modern’

An interview with Nina Power

Lucy Sparling and W. Xiao

*On November 2, 2024, Platypus Affiliated Society members Lucy Sparling and W. Xiao interviewed the cultural critic and social theorist Nina Power, author of *One Dimensional Woman* (2009)¹ and *What Do Men Want?* (2022).² An edited recording of this interview appeared on the *Sh*t Platypus Says* podcast.³ An edited transcript follows.*

Becoming an activist

Lucy Sparling: Take us back to the period from the anti-globalization moment to the anti-war Millennial Left moment. Did you register changes on the Left at that time and in what way did you participate? How were you politicized?

Nina Power: Thank you for inviting me. It’s nice to speak to you both. Years ago, I signed a letter against Platypus;⁴ I’ve since retracted my signing of that letter, largely because I have no idea why I signed it in the first place. This is a lesson for everyone signing open letters!

I was born in 1978, so I am at the end of Gen X. My family are de facto social liberals, neither particularly religious nor political, and they live in the countryside where the concern is to get on with each other, regardless of politics. Politics was not the thing that people cared about in the 90s; often people were upset that things weren’t politicized enough. People who were involved in activism were looked down upon: “why do you care?”

I was at university from 97 to 02. I was not particularly political, because I was in Coventry, at Warwick University. I think there was a de facto Left-liberalism in the universities, but it was gentle. The 90s are often regarded as quite depoliticized, partly because of the victory of the unipolar world since the collapse of the Berlin Wall — that was my first political memory; we went to a farmer’s house to watch it on the television.

In the early 2000s there was a big arms fair, maybe in London, maybe at the ExCeL,⁵ and that was the first big protest I went to. I was moved, initially, because Britain was — still is — involved in exporting arms.

¹ (Winchester: Zero Books, 2009).

² *What Do Men Want? Masculinity and Its Discontents* (Dublin: Allen Lane, 2022).

³ “Ep 71: Nina Power Interview & the United Healthcare Assassination,” *Sh*t Platypus Says* (December 15, 2024), <soundcloud.com>.

⁴ See <www.leninology.co.uk>.

⁵ The newly privatised Defence and Systems Equipment International until 2009 (thereafter Defence and Security Equipment International) exhibited in Surrey in 1999, before moving to London; the first exhibition at the newly opened ExCeL (Exhibition Centre London) opened on September 11, 2001.

When 9/11 happened I remember thinking, like many of my Leftist friends, almost conspiratorially about it — conspiracy is now more associated with the Right, but after 9/11 it was the Left that was saying, “There’s something suspicious about this; it will be used as an opportunity to crush domestic descent and go to war.” That was the main position on the Left. People were circulating DVDs about what was really going on. “The evil empire, the American government — they want war; they want oil. This is an asset raid on the Middle East, and these justifications about human rights are just absolute pabulum, an ideological cover story.”

I became involved in the huge anti-war protests of 2002 and 03. Many people did. One of the main slogans, which I thought was a bit weak at the time, was “Not in Our Name.”⁶ It indicates a sort of politics: “This is our country, and we don’t want to be involved in this war. We’re opposing it as citizens.” It was probably effective in getting people on board. And of course, it was a Labour government that went to war, under Blair.

And then I was largely not involved in politics. I was doing my PhD and teaching, with Mark Fisher, at Orpington College.

Warwick University and CCRU

LS: Mark Fisher had been part of the CCRU⁷ milieu at Warwick. What was your involvement?

NP: I came to Warwick in 97, when I was 18. Mark was 10 years older. A group had come over from Birmingham with Sadie Plant and they worked with Nick Land. There was an interesting mix — a productive antagonism — between people doing cultural studies and people doing philosophy. We were talking about the internet and the world to come.

LS: Was there a political sensibility?

NP: It was anti-political. People were thinking in terms of the technology to come, and how this would transform the human. At Middlesex University I wrote my PhD about humanism and anti-humanism, largely in relation to the political Left, the history of Marxism, Feuerbach and the Young and Left Hegelians, Sartre, and Althusser. Partly because in my time at Warwick I had been so confused by the way in which everyone would describe themselves as “anti-humanist.” There are lots of different ways of being an anti-humanist: scientific anti-humanist, post-humanist, trans-humanist; it could even be about your reading of Marx. It took me a long time to isolate the different strands.

⁶ Not in Our Name (NION) was founded in the U.S. on March 23, 2002 by members of the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA, among others, to organise the anti-war movement along avowedly less sectarian lines than its sibling Act Now to Stop War and End Racism (ANSWER). The slogan was adopted internationally, albeit without reference to NION itself.

⁷ Cybernetic Culture Research Unit, formed at Warwick University in 1995.

Politics in the old mode was regarded as passé. Everything to do with protest, political parties — all that stuff was “so early 20th century.” What was more interesting was robots and the internet. People were having all kinds of fantasies, some of which were not necessarily inaccurate or uninteresting. The idea was that the human subject would be transformed through technology, and this was already happening, and we would enter a post-political state.

This culminates in the work of Nick Land, who moved to China to chase the flows of capital off the ends of the Earth. And there is that aspect in people like Deleuze and Guattari and the post-1968 stuff, which people were heavily invested in at Warwick — it was Foucault, Deleuze, neo-Nietzscheanism, and against the human. But it wasn’t a critique of humanism from a post-colonial standpoint. It was more like, “Humans are over; it’s capital and robots all the way down.”

LS: And how would you characterise the Gen X Left, of which some of this Warwick milieu was part?

NP: The absence of leadership. We were a suicidal, withdrawn, and drug-taking generation. The 90s were hedonistic. It didn’t translate into a great political generation. So many of the cultural figures — Kurt Cobain, David Foster Wallace — they just killed themselves. There was a passive personalism. There’s no great Gen X politician. Also, numerically, we’re not very big.

Shifts in the politics of the Left in the 2000s

W. Xiao: What was the nature of the shift from the anti-globalization movement to the anti-war Millennial movement?

NP: There was huge suspicion of corporatism, of multinationals, of state complicity with them, and I don’t know if it would even describe itself as the Left, but anti-globalization was partly about the preservation of difference. It wasn’t against nationalism, interestingly. It’d say, “There are different cultures and different countries; we’re up against this homogenizing force, in the form of capital, that will destroy all of these differences, and will destroy indigenous ways of life, in this great push to commodify and asset-strip.” It was partly environmental, partly anti-capitalist. There was a great suspicion of big pharma. Millions of people were being prescribed the first generation of antidepressants, including friends of mine who were brutalised by them. A friend killed himself, unable to get off those drugs.

It was also tied up with a critique of bad food — that was a Left position. There was a defence of the naturalness of the human body and a defense of difference. This is reflected in a lot of the post-68 philosophy, where difference is key. These arguments have largely moved to the Right now.

9/11 crushed the anti-globalization movement. People were reading Naomi Klein's *No Logo* (1999)⁸ — and Hardt and Negri's *Empire* (2000)⁹ if they wanted something stronger or longer. There was a kind of hope in the anti-globalization movement. It seemed powerful. It's tied in with rave and the fact that people were hanging out a lot together, in person — this is way before internet capture and a certain kind of atomization.

Obviously 9/11 was used as a justification for wars in the Middle East and the politics became more local in the sense that, as “the people,” we were opposed to “our government” doing this, and that included a lot of people who'd voted for the New Labour project.¹⁰ Even though they had voted for Blair they hadn't known that he was going to become “Bush's poodle” — a lapdog for the empire. People were using that language, talking about Bush as Hitler.

A lot of the slogans were things like “Make tea, not war” — milquetoast. We had about a million people on the street in 2003; they were upset that we hadn't stormed Parliament: “We had the numbers; we could have done something more. This ‘nice day out’ business didn't change anything.” Blair was saying, “Saddam Hussein wouldn't have allowed his people to have this protest and we, in our democratic societies, did — and therefore we should bring them democracy.” People like Noam Chomsky and Michael Moore were important at this point. People who were very critical of the American Empire.

WX: And within the Millennial era, how did you transition from being a politically motivated activist in the anti-war movement to a highly intellectual academic milieu?

NP: There was disillusionment after 2003, but it wasn't as bad as what happened, in my local experience, after 2010, when we'd lost the student movement. This experience of a whole series of failures was extremely demoralizing and led to the factionalism that seems to plague the Left. This was then mediated through the technology, and then people were just denouncing each other constantly. I was getting on with things, thinking, “I should probably get an academic job, I don't know what else to do with my life.”

There wasn't such a stark opposition. It doesn't take much time to go to a protest or a meeting. There were a lot of intellectuals involved in the anti-war movement, and I was hanging around with people who then got involved with Historical Materialism and Verso. There was a London Left scene that was first-and-foremost intellectual and secondarily activist.

LS: Did you have a sense of your role as an intellectual within that moment?

NP: Not really. Everyone started writing blogs, and this is before social media took off. So, the interaction was much more organic and spontaneous because it was just people linking to each other in an uncoordinated way. Mark Fisher was a huge figure

⁸ *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies* (Toronto: Knopf Canada, 2000).

⁹ (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).

¹⁰ The UK Labour Party rebranded as “New Labour” for the general elections of 1997, 2001, 2005, and 2010. 9/11 and the War on Terror followed Tony Blair's second landslide victory in 2001.

for everybody in that scene; he was encouraging — he got everyone to write, in a lovely way. A very enthusiastic man. People like Slavoj Žižek were a big deal, people who were fusing Marxism with cultural analysis with politics. Mark was good at that, and widely read. I think *Capitalist Realism* (2009)¹¹ sold at least 30,000 copies or something, big for a small, independent press.

2010s, the UK student movement

LS: The early 2010s were dominated by the post-financial-crisis austerity experience. There was Occupy; there was the Arab Spring. Students protested in the UK over the massive hike in tuition fees. The philosophy department at Middlesex University was threatened with closure, and there were protests against it. You became more involved in activism with these student movements, and through Defend the Right to Protest¹² (which was, in part, a “front group” for the Socialist Workers Party (UK) (SWP)). It was a high point of activism. If you were to try to educate a new generation of activists, what lessons would you want to pass on?

NP: Something people were trying to do but which was stopped for various reasons was to link up the different struggles. The student movement had an idealistic focus, and I completely agreed with it: free education for everybody. I was worried about the class politics of it. It’s not a Marxist or a political point; I felt there was a real injustice in terms of people’s capacity to learn that was stymied by class. I thought that the fee increase would massively prevent people who were from poorer backgrounds from going to university because of the calculation of risk, and the loan.

But the student movement was never attached to class politics. People were talking about having “no future” — this was a line that many on the Millennial Left were talking about, including Novara.¹³ The idea was that young people would be in debt; there would be no jobs or intense competition for very few jobs — and that is what transpired. This led to, or aided and abetted, things like cancel culture. People thought, “I can get rid of my rivals by accusing them of something — whether it’s true or not, it doesn’t matter.” A Hobbesian state of nature among the middle class came about because people didn’t want to lose their position; they were clinging on for dear life to the life they’d been promised.

The Millennial Left was not necessarily wrong to talk about “no future” as their horizon of possibility. But I’m not sure how helpful it was because it increasingly detached people’s struggles and situations from each other. The detachment of the intellectual from manual labor was total at this point, and it reinforced a disharmonious separation of the Left, which became increasingly abstracted — and really opposed

¹¹ Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2009).

¹² Defend the Right to Protest was founded in late 2010 in response to state repression of the student protests against increased tuition fees. See <defendtherighttoprotest.org>.

¹³ “Dead End: ‘No Future’, Utopia and Optimism,” *Novara Media* (January 21, 2012), <novaramedia.com>.

to the working class. The middle-class Left, the liberals, hate normal people. That's a huge problem.

I got involved in the protests. I was going out with someone who was on trial for a long time, someone very seriously injured by the police in 2010.¹⁴ It was very emotional, and I went crazy because the trials were going on for years. The state, under UK Conservative party leader, David Cameron, was trying to crack down on protests. We were worried about the huge amounts of injustice going on in terms of trials and sentencing.

We were opposed to “the bad state,” to put it in a vulgar way. We were opposed to the police, the courts, and the authoritarian punitive state. I'm still worried about the authoritarian dimension of the state. It was current UK Labour Party Prime Minister Keir Starmer, as DPP, who was overseeing the prosecutions of students and the rioters.¹⁵ We were trying to tie police violence against the students to police violence in general: “Who has the monopoly on violence?” But at the same time, and I didn't notice until late on, there was this identitarian thing that was happening, which was a divisive mechanism which lots of people used to punish each other.

It took off around 2013. Some of the people who got involved in the student movement, especially those who supported Alfie, my then-boyfriend, were almost like an avant-garde. They were art students who were “anarcho” socially — squat parties, etc. A lot of them were posh; they wanted to be cool; they were into Tumblr, and they imported its politics. And I didn't see it coming because I was friends with the SWP and other anti-authoritarian people.

A downturn

LS: Once the “high” activist moment of 2011 was on the wane, there were various organisational shifts that occurred. The SWP, following an organizational crisis regarding the handling of an internal investigation into a rape allegation, had a crack-up. New network-type organizations emerged. They all had different relationships to the history of the SWP, but the majority of these groups were made up of the younger (Millennial) generation. Other sectarian Leftist organizations also experienced their younger generations, who had been recruited in activism of the anti-war movement or later in the early 2010s, breaking away. You also saw early examples of cancel culture. For example, the Feminist Society at Goldsmiths started burning Trotskyist literature.

NP: There was so much disappointment and disintegration that it almost necessarily took a form of self-hatred. I remember being confused, thinking, “Aren't we opposed

¹⁴ After receiving a brain injury from a baton strike, Alfie Meadows was arrested and prosecuted for violent disorder. He was unanimously acquitted in 2013 and received an official apology and a damages payment from the Metropolitan Police in 2023. See Oliver Snow, “Alfie Meadows: Met agrees payout for man injured at 2010 protest,” *BBC*, September 15, 2023, <www.bbc.co.uk>.

¹⁵ The Director of Public Prosecutions is head of the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) in the UK; Keir Starmer held the position from 2008 to 2013.

to exploitation?” And, sure, oppression is a form of exploitation. But for these people, being upset about something was like a new civil rights issue. It took me a while to disentangle: “Hang on, some of this stuff’s mental. This doesn’t make any sense at all. It is completely opposed to the stuff we were doing. This is a shift away from the politics that we were doing before. And some of this is really divisive. Why are people denouncing each other online?”

And the SWP became irrelevant. Their opportunism was blatant, and all the good organizers, the people who actually did things and could explain why they were opposed to capitalism and so on, were no longer there.

In Defend the Right to Protest, which had far more women than men, most members were not in the SWP. There were lots of people who were motivated by what had happened. Lots of young people were charged and arrested; we had 16 trials. This stuff takes a long time, and the state has a lot of time, but you don’t. It’s brutal; it goes on for years. Some of them became human rights lawyers.

I remember someone who moved to America and became involved in the earlier iteration of Black Lives Matter.

We were doing stuff around Prevent at that time, because the War on Terror was still going on and Prevent was being used against Muslim students.¹⁶ People were being arrested or suspended for downloading material that they were researching.

We were thinking from the standpoint of defending protest itself — rather than the content. But the content is not incidental. I wrote an article for *The Guardian* defending the EDL’s right to march,¹⁷ which was controversial at the time, and people still cite it as proof that I’m evil. But I was trying to be consistent on the rights of protestors. I’d been thinking about protest, free speech, freedom of expression, freedom of association. In that sense, I was more classically liberal than some on the Left. I was obviously denouncing the politics of the EDL, but I was saying that they had a right to march and we shouldn’t do this because then the state will use it against us.

LS: How did the shift happen, in terms of freedom of speech?

NP: In the 90s there was an acceptance of freedom of expression and speech. It was the Left who were making controversial comedies, saying things you weren’t supposed to, pushing the envelope, and being transgressive. It was almost like we’d reached this point historically where, because things were relatively okay, people were allowed to mock everything. It was a party at the end of history. I had internalized the idea that the Left was for free speech, free expression, avant-garde art, and investigating dark things.

The new censorship, the partisan politics of some groups and the idea that you couldn’t make jokes about others groups — I associate those with 2013–14, after the

¹⁶ The Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015 made it a duty for those working in education and health to report incidences of potential “radicalization.”

¹⁷ The English Defence League, founded in 2009; it has since disbanded. Nina Power, “A protest ban isn’t the way to stop the racist EDL,” *The Guardian*, August 30, 2011, <www.theguardian.com>.

student movement. The “Left” started to move in an identitarian direction and it was much less fun, frankly.

The gender stuff got totally confusing; no one would speak to me about it, and I absolutely lost my mind. I really looked up to this old-school anti-globalization anarchist Helen Steele, who’s opposed to the state. She’s been spied on by the police. She’d won a libel trial. She was a hero on the Left. She said something like, “Can we have a conversation? I don’t know what I think yet, but if we’re going to change the law, can we discuss it? What is a man and what is a woman?” For that she was attacked at the anarchist book fair.¹⁸

WX: In 2011–13, you were already sensing this authoritarianism, this moralizing identitarianism. But you didn’t leave the Left. You were supportive of and sympathetic to what your comrades were doing in the Labour Party. Why did you not respond more violently to those doubts?

NP: Personally, I was messed up. Alfie’s trials had gone on for so long and I had two teaching jobs and was doing too many things. In 2016–17 I withdrew. I was not well. When they shut down the art gallery LD50, I was not involved.¹⁹ In retrospect, that was a bad moment. I was trying to convince myself, “Maybe these people are right. Maybe there are Nazis and fascists. But hang on. They’re calling 1980s lesbians Nazis. There’s something wrong here.” Nobody would speak to me about it. I didn’t understand what was going on. But I also refused to understand because I didn’t want to accept it. And then, at a certain point, it became absolutely unbearable. My conscience was in pain. And so I wrote something on Facebook about Labour suspending female members, which was controversial.

Corbyn, etc.

WX: The image in my head is the SWP as a big tent organizer: people who are members of the SWP, plus a whole broader milieu that you were a part of, such as intellectuals and activists. Amidst the crisis and collapse of that big tent a lot of those individuals were sucked up into electoral politics and into the Labour Party.

NP: The idea was that you could drag the Labour Party Leftward and that even though it was still going to be part of parliamentary capitalism there would be an attempt at redistribution, and student fees would be free. It wasn’t a fantasy that they were proposing. It was probably a fantasy to think that Corbyn would ever become Prime Minister. I didn’t understand how dominant the Labour Right were, and how underhanded they would be. That was yet another disappointment.

¹⁸ Helen Steel, “My statement on events at London Anarchist Bookfair 2017,” *Helen Steel* (November 22, 2017), <helensteel12.wordpress.com>.

¹⁹ In February 2017, Shut Down LD50 was formed to organize protests against Lucia Diego’s East London art gallery LD50, which had hosted a “Neo-reaction” conference the previous summer and showcased artworks considered far Right or fascist. LD50 was subsequently closed for several months.

Basically, the Left lost every single battle for a million years, and of course that demoralized many people; lots just disappeared and did their own thing.

WX: There must have been friction going into the Labour Party. You went from an in-the-streets moment, being persecuted by people like Keir Starmer, to entering the Labour Party.

NP: For a lot of the anarchist Left or Antifa, they were never going to be on board with electoral politics. A lot of those people were working around individual workplace grievances, but they got very captured by the identitarian thing; it's often the anarchists who are protesting the feminists. It's weird how the anti-fascist movement started defending state policies, almost like the shock troops of neoliberalism. They're supposed to be opposed to states. Everything got inverted.

And then Mark died. Mark killed himself in 2017. This was awful for everyone, and not just people who knew him. Symbolically, it was the end of a moment. It's easy to politicize it, even though it's a personal matter. Mark dying was perceived by many as a deep sadness about the state of the Left, rightly or wrongly.

LS: There's a chapter in your first book²⁰ with a tantalising title about the socialist "program." To what extent did you think of yourself as a socialist? Concerning going into the Labour Party — is that a strategy that future socialists should think about?

NP: Capitalism ended up being blamed for everything in a strange way. "I'm depressed; blame capitalism." Paradoxically, this created a false impression of agency; people felt unable to do anything at all, including organize, because capitalism was a black iron prison. But there are different ways of understanding it — as a process and as a set of relations.

We didn't have a good historical or political analysis of the economic situation. The micro-promises around free education, etc. were so alluring that they switched people onto Corbynism, and their energy was then directed solely towards that, only to be disappointed yet again. It was bound to end in burnout, crisis, and people leaving.

In terms of socialism: before any analysis, there is a more basic feeling of injustice, more or less exacerbated by the perception of the Right as cruel: "the Tories are mean." It's correct that the economic interest of the ruling class and the Right is always opposed to the interests of most people, but it was personalized when it shouldn't have been, and politicized when it shouldn't have been.

WX: In what periods would you have considered yourself a socialist?

NP: Probably from 98 onwards. And if we're talking about defending the working class or protecting humanity, these are still things I'm committed to. I want everybody to flourish. But elitism crept in on the Left; it started to abhor normal people. That was partly a function of the massive expansion of higher education, which was damaging — loads of people massively in debt. Not only do they think of themselves as consumers and clients — and that changes the learning relationship — it also changes people's expectations when they leave, especially when there are fewer jobs. People

²⁰ Power, *One Dimensional Woman*.

feel aggrieved and they think, “What capital do I have? I have cultural capital. This is what differentiates me from everyone else. And this is what makes me middle class.” It detaches people from real life, and it becomes a new moralism.

LS: Does the feminist notion “the personal is the political” have a lot to answer for in the current moment?²¹

NP: The original phrase was both: the personal was political and the political was personal. When Sheila Rowbotham and others were talking about political activism, they were saying, “We’re given all of the crap work because we’re women.”

In my experience, the socialist Left is a misogynistic load of men who pay lip service to feminism but are actually megalomaniac demagogues. There are some seriously messed up men on the Left who have this fantasy of themselves as great leaders, but they hate actual people.

That was revealed around the gender stuff. A lot of them came out against their comrades — the women who were involved in trade unions and long-term activism who were simply saying, “Can we discuss this? I’m not sure we should change the meanings of words in law without a proper democratic discussion.” And it didn’t matter how reasonable the women were. They were absolutely demonized and targeted as Right-wing fascists or Nazis.

One dimensional woman

WX: What motivated you to write *One Dimensional Woman*?

NP: My friend Tariq Goddard had set up Zero Books because he was desperately in debt and he saw us all writing blogs around 2004–05. I don’t know how much money he made, but there was a market for short theory books, and Mark Fisher, who was involved at the start, said that we should write books for 16-year-olds. My book was a cobbled-together piece of crap. It’s a pamphlet. It was scrabbled together from bits of my blog. It was not edited or proofread; it’s full of errors. We were all so used to putting stuff up online. It wasn’t like these were worked-out positions. These were hasty thoughts that were part of an ongoing conversation. But the moment you put something in a book, you’re tied to it. I didn’t realize that would be the case.

I agree with a lot of what I wrote; some of it’s funny. The stuff about work was insightful because it’s based on the experience that we were having in the knowledge economy. I was doing agency work and I hated the feminine branding: “The new economy is female.” So, I was thinking, what if the economy is now like the man — the boyfriend? Why are we being groomed for this economy? It is in no way a proper analysis. When I speak to Zoomers, people in their early 20s, they have a syncretic understanding because they’ve grown up with the internet, and they’ve read millions

²¹ Carol Hanisch’s 1969 essay “Some Thoughts in Response to Dottie [Zellner]’s Thoughts on a Women’s Liberation Movement” acquired the title “The Personal Is Political” in 1970 when it was included in the anthology *Notes from the Second Year: Women’s Liberation*, eds. Shulamith Firestone and Anne Koedt (1970).

of different things. I didn't even know what other books were out there. So my book doesn't refer to much existing literature; it ignores tons of feminism. The point I made in the book about the ideological use of feminism to invade other countries was a good one; it's absolutely correct.

LS: Would you say it was a critique of third-wave feminism?²²

NP: It was a superficial critique of consumerist feminism and the way in which feminism is used to justify anything, as if anything a woman does is feminist. It was about the co-optation of some of the second wave and the gross invocation of feminism to wage war and to sell things. This was obviously, radically against the spirit of the second wave.

LS: Does that third-wave moment have anything to say to the present? The kind of freedoms that are offered through capitalism in that late neoliberal moment — is there anything positive to say about those freedoms, like freedom of expression of one's sexuality? Freedom of integration into the labor market, the ability to work? What would it be like to uphold freedom in that moment?

NP: I was suspicious of what I perceived to be the Right's image of freedom, as I understood it then. I'm not sure if I really had a Left image of freedom at all. I'm still suspicious of Leftist freedom insofar as it says things like "sex work is work" or "surrogacy is good." I'm very second wave in that way. I think that sex is real and important. I'm opposed to the exploitation of women on the basis of their biology. There is an emancipation of women, insofar as I agree with de Beauvoir, that freedom is the freedom to fail. That has been achieved in the West. Freedom is the freedom to be unhappy. Female melancholy is historically important. It would involve making wrong choices.

But I was wary of the argument that feminism had reached its apex in the emancipation of women through work, through labor rights. The idea that once women are economically independent, that means that women are free — how can that possibly be true? I had an anarchist critique of work which was under-theorized — we would have to separate labour and work and so forth — I didn't do that.

WX: What was the incremental value that second-wave feminism brought to the Left? Why did we need it?

NP: It was the most serious intellectual historical moment in feminism — women realizing themselves as historical subjects, being able to say, what would it be like to tell a history from the standpoint of women, what it would be like to think about sexual difference in a meaningful way? In the Hegelian manner: coming to self-consciousness of the female. Of course, it was a consequence of various economic shifts. It participated in them, and also responded to them. In the post-war consensus, and through women's mass entry into the workforce. This raises issues about what it means to be a subject, and men and women become more and more alike. Ivan Illich makes the point

²² Recognition of third-wave feminism is commonly attributed to Rebecca Walker's article "Becoming the Third Wave," *Ms.* (Spring 1992): 86–87.

that after the Industrial Revolution, you create an economic sex, which is an almost indistinguishable subject, and he's sad about that.²³ We don't have to differentiate between male, female, and child labor.

New needs and history

LS: In your later book, *What Do Men Want?*, you explore how the integration of women into work has put greater pressure on the family. Maybe women would prefer to stay at home. There's a continuity with *One Dimensional Woman* in terms of an anti-work perspective — and also regarding the freedom of expression of one's own sexuality. You're highly sceptical of these forms of freedom; they have a consumerist quality to them. *One Dimensional Woman* is named after *One Dimensional Man* (1964),²⁴ in which Marcuse is responding critically to cultural phenomena in society to see how they might point beyond themselves. He is also responding to the Old Left, which emphasized a critique of production; he's recognizing that there needs to be a critique of consumption. That suggests a sense in which his work is anti-consumerist. But I wonder if that is doing justice to Marcuse. Do the new freedoms that capitalism produces in society enable the possibility of experiencing new needs?

NP: I am conservative in the true sense of that word, which is that I don't think human beings change that much. I'm deeply sceptical of false freedoms or things that present themselves as freedoms but actually turn out to be restrictive or oppressive. There is a continuity in the later book — the anti-globalization, the suspicion about corporations and consumerism that comes from the 90s. Stuff around sexuality and identity is boring and false, generally. But it's interesting to look at *One Dimensional Woman* as a historical document, because the gender discussion hadn't happened yet. It's interesting to note that this was not an issue. The aims and ambitions of the second wave were co-opted and turned against it. One example of that would be the household need for double income, which means you can pay everybody less. This is presented to people as economic freedom, but actually it's exploitation; you're less free. I don't see emancipation in new identities. These are yet more ways of selling things to people making oneself a consumer object: the commodification of the body, not just selling sex and selling images, but selling oneself as a worker, and more exploitative things like surrogacy.

WX: What you just described is not what I would think of as conservative. The only thing that I've heard you say that I would characterise as conservative would be describing freedom as "freedom from desire." That seems to be a premodern articulation of freedom. Modern liberty, modern freedom, is not freedom from desire; it's the freedom to become, and a part of that becoming is the almost infinite discovery and elaboration of human needs.

²³ See Ivan Illich, *Gender* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 22–66.

²⁴ Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964).

NP: Yes, that's right, as a diagnosis of my position. I don't think the mode of production changes us particularly, which is revealed when we can relate to texts from 2,000 years ago. I'm not sure that we are modern or have been modern. I'm not sure that modernity happened. Of course, there can be new modalities and new desires — but I'm not sure they're always what they say they are. They are sometimes the opposite.

WX: Was there a universal abstract human being before the 18th century? Or were there just slaves, kings, peasants?

NP: In a way, I don't think there are human beings. There are men and women. And that comes from thinking about people like Illich.

WX: Were there women before the 18th century? Was Cleopatra a woman?

NP: This is such a good question.

WX: She's a semi-divine being, a relative of a god. She would have considered herself as qualitatively distinct material compared to her maid.

NP: Yes, it's a really good question. But when I say that there are only men and women, it is to make a neutral but controversial claim that partly stems from Illich. A feminist was saying, "I've never seen a human body. There is no human neutral human body. There are only male bodies and female bodies." This changed his whole outlook. What does it mean to think of human beings not as humanity, not as the human body, but as men and women? That changes how we see history.

You're right, though, that it would not necessarily have been an important distinction compared to other, more important social distinctions, in pre-modernity. The democratization of humanity, the expansion of humanity, is to give it to more and more groups. But this is part of the problem with the Left: it wants to give more rights to more groups. What it ends up having to do is create new groups, which conflict with previous rights given to others. An obvious example would be rights for people who think they're the opposite sex. Who is going to adjudicate in this clash of rights?

WX: My vulgar Marxism: even prior to political enfranchisement or political inclusion, as soon as we started reproducing humanity on the basis of socially necessary quantitatively commensurable labor time, that labor time is what has rendered all of us human. Wage labor — that's when we get humans, when all these qualitative distinctions collapse.

NP: But you still need women and men to have children. To be vulgar and ideological for a moment.

WX: But this might not be like a men-versus-women thing. It's more pre-modern versus modern. It's historical.

LS: Humanity as such might have a different relationship to Nature than before.

NP: I will perversely insist on saying it hasn't changed that much.

LS: Do you find Rousseau's concept of "Second Nature," which Marx takes up, meaningful?²⁵

²⁵ See Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality Among Men* (1755).

NP: It's difficult for me to get away from a sort of Spinozism, where we are Nature. Everything we do to create ourselves anew, or to reproduce ourselves, doesn't make much difference. We've destroyed the environment; we've created political subjects and systems. Aren't we clever? But we should do a lot less. The problem is activity: most jobs are not just useless, but actively destructive insofar as they create nonsense and waste people's time. I'm interested in useful work, and preserving human formations, many of which still persist despite the best efforts of modernity.

I'm not saying that we're not this amazing intellectual force — consciousness — but I don't know where I stand on the Hegelian question. |**P**

Politics from another angle

M. Sanchez

“YOU HAVE TO make a choice right now. Red or blue. Whatever you think, you must be only one thing and choose only one thing. All that matters is making the choice. One always lies, and one always tells the truth. One always lies when telling the truth, and the other always tells the truth when lying. Good luck!”

In the United States' 2024 Presidential election, about 155 million voted.²⁶ About 244 million of the population was eligible to vote. There are about 341 million people living in the country — only about 63.5% of them were voters in the election.²⁷ The majority of nonvoters, when asked, responded that they don't wish they had voted in the 2024 Presidential election.²⁸

These are the measures of disengagement from the American electoral representation industry as they appear for the closed feedback loop of voting and voter polls. They don't tell us the content of the disengagement and disillusionment, which can be identified with any number of reasons and culture war fads. But the void continues, the massification carried out in modern capitalist society is never able to perfect itself into absolute engagement, agreement, and affirmation.

It is clear that the system of representation is broken. It can no longer reconcile the class fractions engaged with it. The petite-bourgeoisie who make up the mass basis of American representational politics are becoming more polarized than ever, and there is no longer much of a sense of constituent political coherence. Most people more or less want something new, things as they are have exhausted themselves.

Those who are complacent with things as they are have decided to lay down and stubbornly hold on to a sinking ship. They no longer have a will to change or adapt.

²⁶ Domenico Montanaro, “A wild year in politics, by the numbers,” *NPR*, December 27, 2024, <www.npr.org>.

²⁷ United States Census Bureau, “U.S. and World Population Clock,” when given the date February 8, 2024, <www.census.gov>.

²⁸ Pew Research Center, “Voters' and nonvoters' experiences with the 2024 election” (December 4, 2024), <www.pewresearch.org>.

The Democratic Party is the face of this dead and dying portion of the empire. But those who are willing to actively transform the political system of the empire are even more miniscule, and have limited their ambitions to supporting crude politicians in elections over finger-wagging bureaucrats. In other words, not even the second election of Donald Trump has changed very much about U.S. politics.

The two-party system is nothing but a carousel of revolving doors. The whole thing has the appearance of constant action and change, to the exhaustion of the politics junkies, but it's only so much movement to keep in place. The hulking, Leviathanic state is continuous across parties and administrations. Even the administrations that try to dramatically cut it down and streamline it, like Trump's administration, are still only giving a haircut and shave to the monster while rearranging its looted furniture and shifting its imperial hoard-collection around.

The bourgeoisie was once a class with its own identifiable political thought and cultural norms, a class which thought about its situation, wrote about its deepest ambitions, and strategized for a long-term future. As it has become secure in its power, as monopoly capital has grown and centralized to gigantic proportions, and as the capitalist state has consolidated into a dizzying complex of machines overseen by professional experts, the bourgeoisie has become superfluous and lazy. Capitalists today care first and foremost about immediate convenience and enjoyment, and are often the most one-dimensional of the whole one-dimensional society. When we look at Mark Zuckerberg, Elon Musk, and Jeff Bezos, do we see a bourgeoisie that has any sense of a mission in the world, or do we see ridiculous people who have no idea what they want?

The capitalist class has not had to seriously strategize politically for a long time. Of course, there is a whole network of think tanks, intellectuals-for-hire, and lobbying groups which ensure that capitalists keep their dragon's hoard of their income on profits. But this hardly constitutes a serious, long-term strategy and world-vision. They don't make for great strategists, because they don't need to do anything but give their mercenaries money to ensure that things stay more or less as they are. Trump's administration defunding USAID, which supported an entire ecosystem of pro-U.S., pro-capitalist political groups, only confirms their superfluosity.

The capitalists have atrophied and become mediocre and weak in their senses, and they have done so specifically because their political power is more hegemonic and secure than ever in the mechanical form of their state patron. Georges Sorel warned:

Enfeebled classes habitually put their trust in people who promise them the protection of the State, without ever trying to understand how this protection could possibly harmonize their discordant interests; they readily enter into every coalition formed for the purpose of forcing concessions from the government; they greatly admire charlatans who speak with self-assurance. Socialism must be exceedingly careful if it is not

to fall to the level of what Engels called bombastic anti-Semitism, and the advice of Engels on this point has not always been followed.²⁹

This has clearly come to pass in the United States. There are no longer hard cultural or political distinctions between lively classes. The apparent distinctions are only in how the mediocrity of a calcified and lazy capitalist civilization is distributed — who votes for what capitalist politicians and who aligns on what mass media-engineered culture war issue. Everyone thinks like a capitalist, and the capitalists hardly think at all. They merely respond in an immediate way to stimulus with anxiety, fear, rage, or discomfort.

Without class hatred, and without the confrontation of classes, the entire society has become sluggish and uninteresting. Class in the common parlance is nothing but the measurement of income, and that income is understood as the distribution of some pre-existing hoard of wealth. Relations of production hardly figure into individual consciousness at all, much less find their political expression in open and conscious class struggle. Everyone is nothing but a measured distribution, some a greater quantity and some a lesser quantity, of the *same*. Everyone buys the same things, watches the same things, believes the same things, feels the same things, wants the same things. Some just get to do more of it, while some do less of it.

The only way to bring life back into things is to make political confrontation possible once again. But that requires freeing politics from its identity with the administration of the bureaucratic state, freeing sociality from its homogenous massification, and creating a subject of politics which is no longer just the voting citizen who keeps up to date on the 24 hour news cycle.

The carousel

Politics has become nothing but a function of the capitalist state. The state has grown to massive, all-pervading proportions — whether its gigantism is expressed in liberalism or conservatism. Politics disengaged from the self-composition and self-articulation of classes, especially the majority who can live by nothing but their work, is hardly politics at all. Politics today is instead the carousel, revolving around the state.

Political thought today tends to define victory as either winning the electoral contests for the administration of the state or as achieving recognition and scraps from the Leviathan. Only a small number of people really participate directly in this process, mostly professionals engaged with the mysterious workings and secret passwords of the technocratic bureaucracy.

There are many gradations of these professionals, from national politicians to local volunteers in non-governmental organizations. But all of them are bureaucrats staffing the state machinery, which keeps itself in motion in a manner hardly different from the big capitalist corporations like Amazon or Walmart. The main distinction is really in

²⁹ Georges Sorel, “The Political General Strike,” in *Reflections on Violence*, ed. Jeremy Jennings (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 153.

that the state is less efficient and less clear in its aims in administering and managing society, and so the political bureaucrats at lower levels have more room to appear highly active and creative. Many of them even do what they do out of genuine faith in political change. But the logic of the career, and it is a career, lends itself to compromise and opportunism, since everything is subordinated to the self-preservation of the state totality.

The problem we are faced with is that even truly democratic politics is already limited to reinforcing bourgeois society. Active citizenship, beyond watching news scroll by on a screen and dropping a ballot for someone somewhere, hardly exists anymore. Democracy only thrives on the foundation of mass politics; it does not thrive where the propertyless majority are disengaged and disempowered.

Because of this, any attempt at a ready-made democratic struggle will crash on the rocks of legalism and professionalism. We will be left trying to substitute a mass where one has not yet grown, or we will try to politicize a ready-made mass in the form we find it. On the one hand, you have Angela Davis calling on communists to vote Democrat to defend a perpetually endangered democracy every 2–4 years.³⁰ On the other hand, you have Chris Cutrone evaluating Trump’s Republican radicalism as heralding the revival of politics and the rule of law in the myth of an Empire of Liberty.³¹ We should be suspicious of any attempts to capture the constituencies of either party by working with those parties, or of standing as isolated communists and trying to redirect the energy behind charismatic politicians towards communism through their enthusiasm for their representatives.

Pragmatism, gradualism, reformism, and the liberal variant of “anti-fascism” that frames fascism in two-party terms all feed new energy back into the carousel. They all thrive within the difference between “good enough” and “perfection.” They dismiss the aims of anything genuinely new as utopian, and so fail to make an independent enough stand from the state’s cycles in order to achieve short-term aims. They preach the middle, so they stay mediocre.

We can’t only be defensive of what little we already have. There is always an emergency; we do not have to confine our response to emergencies into preservation of the status quo. We have to take on the offensive to carve out a space to do something differently. We have to try to understand our immediate and long-term aims as political independence. We communists have to become strangers in a strange land, bearing a “this-worldly intention towards this becoming homeland, the future problem in the bearing, encompassing *space* of homeland: of *nature*. The problem of what is worth wishing for in general, or of the *highest good*, always remains the central point here.”³²

³⁰ C.J. Atkins, “Angela Davis: Electing Harris will open space for more radical struggles,” *People’s World* (September 17, 2024), <www.peoplesworld.org>.

³¹ Chris Cutrone, “The Future Belongs to America. So Should Greenland.,” *Compact* (January 9, 2025), <www.compactmag.com>.

³² Ernst Bloch, “Introduction,” in *The Principle of Hope*, vol. 1, trans. Neville Plaice, et al. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), 17.

Democracy can only be revived outside and against the administrative state. As Henri Lefebvre noted, the attitude expressed in favor of politics as a serious career represents “the expression of a latent terrorism tied, moreover, to the sense of responsibility, to the respect of competence, incontestable qualities of the techno-bureaucracy.”³³ Strategically we should emphasize the need for a conscious confrontation with bourgeois civilization, since we should make ourselves citizens of a future society instead of constituents of the current one. But we should do so with an equal emphasis on the practical, immanent limitation, the fact that we’re struggling to overcome it from within. “I have lived in the monster and I know its entrails; my sling is David’s.”³⁴

The sideshows

The solution many offer to this blocked and stagnant juncture is to have faith that to take action is good in itself, that those who act must be the authorities in politics, and that those who act the most should have the most authority. Usually they dismiss thought and theory as wasting precious time that could be used acting, acting, acting.

Most of them are probably sincere in their desire to bring about something new. Many of them are students who, with justification, look on the entire past generation of Left politics as a failure. They believe that immediate action is the clear and obvious solution to powerlessness.

When one only acts blindly, one is beholden to the ready-made order. One’s action is forced through the confined corridors of its limited possibilities. Blind action is at the mercy of whatever orders things. By dismissing thinking for themselves, the actionists fall into the danger of no longer acting for themselves. Immediate action is not self-organization. Self-organization sustains the process of self-emancipation, instead of limiting it to the narrow and stale air of a trapped situation in the name of producing immediately familiar effects.

The separation of head and hand implied in actionism is prolonged in the class of professional activists and the network of professional activist organizations. They live on the carousel and the new energy that it brings to them. They themselves are carousel-like sideshows. Many of them acknowledge this fact openly by running hopeless, funds-absorbent Presidential campaigns in competition for the attention given to the main show. They ensure that discontent is fed back into the cycle of sameness.

Even what is genuinely new and promising among the actionists can become bogged down in the self-preservation of these formal organizations. The formal organizations see their formal membership and leadership as good in themselves, symbols of seriousness. They believe that all actionists must be available, as loyal and unquestioning employees, at the disposal of the leaders’ watchful and wise eyes.

An episode of this unfolded in 2023–24, when the professional activists swooped down on the encampment movement against investment in the Israeli genocide of

³³ Henri Lefebvre, “Reflections on the Politics of Space,” in *State, Space, World: Selected Essays*, eds. Gerald Moore and Neil Brenner, trans. Neil Brenner, et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 175.

³⁴ José Martí to Manuel Mercado (May 18, 1895), <www.counterpunch.org>.

Palestinians. The professional activists successfully disciplined the new energy, which could have broken from the carousel and sideshows by breaking with the closed circle of national electoral and professional politics. They are trying to do the same thing now with the wave of anti-ICE demonstrations.

The sideshows fail to become anything other than the sideshows of the carousel. This is related directly to actionism's refusal of thought, caution, and strategy. Actionism becomes conservative pragmatism when the capacity of the actors and their scale of action are limited to a small circle of possibilities and isolated scatterings of actors. The professional activists, those who think for the actors, are symptoms of this situation who also prolong it.

Reviving politics

We think that whatever moves the most dramatically, and so catches our eyes, is what pulses with the most vitality and dynamism. Awe-inspiring movement can just as well be the lifeless flapping of scraps in the wind.

The Make America Great Again (MAGA) movement is itself a form of actionism, and Trump is a charismatic professional activist. Liberals think he will destroy democracy. They conflate democracy with rule of law, and rule of law with bureaucratic, formal procedures. Trump thinks he will save the bourgeois republic by cutting the imperial Leviathan down to a slim and lean fighting form. Trump and his administration have been carrying out this political reform movement from above, by decree, with the hope that the political leadership of the capitalists will guarantee success by doing their part.

But the capitalists are lazy and complacent in this overripe era of monopoly capital. The capitalist leader who enjoys self-representation within the administration, Elon Musk, has been spending more time stripping the government for scraps and distributing the spoils than trying to help realize the vision of reform. Trump's vision flies too high; he pulls the reins much harder than what the overgrown and atrophied country can handle.

Trump thinks if he feeds the imperial-state beast with new territories, new funds for capital, and the revitalizing force of war, that it will wake up and begin to cooperate. He calls the country to unity against the inner enemies, whoever the Department of Homeland Security decides they may be. He coaxes the people with imperialist adventures abroad in Greenland, Mexico, Canada, Gaza, etc. But he puts far too much faith in his own class, and he can only appeal to the people as they are: passive consumer-citizens. Many are even workers, but these workers do not act as proletarians — they truly believe that their labor power is also their *capital* just because it's their commodity to sell.

The capitalist state remains the most highly adaptable and flexible element of the passive society that it represents. It is the subject of this society, and what Trump has done is become the personified subjectivity of its will to live and adapt. As long as this

state lacks a vital and self-acting base, the subjectivity of its personality can only be an actionist who tries to substitute his actions, the actions of the executive, for that of the people. This is limited to the desperate self-contortions of the state, which cannot find a register in the world of the society.

The legislature, which traditionally represents and reconciles the class fractions of capitalist society, has declined into procedure and filibustering self-obstruction. Meanwhile, the personification of bureaucratic rationality — the judiciary — and the personification of political administration — the executive — have each grown incredibly powerful, each acting more or less arbitrarily. Society has stagnated into the raw material of a technocratic state. Trump's actions are a kind of bourgeois actionism, an attempt to overcome a blocked and exhausted situation by means of the initiative of a few. They will end hardly differently from any other actionism, with the reinforcement of the prevailing state of things.

The Democrats have already discredited themselves with their failure to pose a serious alternative to Trump. Trump and the MAGA movement are the only vital element in bourgeois politics today, save for the social-democratic sideshows in a few local political settings. If the MAGA movement discredits itself and the Republican Party, there will be a situation where both parties of the capitalist state will have been discredited and thrown into disarray.

In such a situation, it would be imperative for communists to push a split between the people and the state. What we have now is a *demos*³⁵ that has become identical to the state, massified into its population. If the people are to be more than the homogenous mass of raw material for the administration and bureaucracy, they must revolt and begin to take on some form of their own.

The *demos* and officialdom would begin to separate, the predominance of formality collapsing. In this development, the people would already begin to be something other than the *demos*, the constituency of the national state, and begin to become the seeds of something new. New possibilities are opened up when the people set out into an independent form of politics, and possibilities even open up when the people achieve class independence — splitting the proletariat from the bourgeoisie, reviving mass politics from out of the molasses of massification.

Politics must begin from another angle. To make this turn, we must turn away from the carousel and the sideshows. A new communism would begin as primarily negative, embracing and cohering the disillusionment and discontent people feel into a Great Refusal of the existing system. Only in this initial negative movement — “we don't want *that*, we don't want to lay down and continue to accept *any* of *that*” — can the path to affirmation of something new begin.

We have to start as the most consistent refusers, the ones who truly do not want this dead weight, in order to become the ones who want more life. A revolution is not about infinite violence. Most of its process is the soft formation of new tissue.

³⁵ [Ancient Greek] (1) A country-district, land; (2) the people of a country, the commons, etc.

Democracy is a path for development, but it is not our horizon. We can only act from within the capitalist world, but we must act towards our own world beyond it. The “limited horizon of bourgeois right” can only be crossed by a strong and confident step which knows that it is heading somewhere else, which knows this horizon here is only a limit to reach on the way beyond it.³⁶

An unconscious attempt at completing bourgeois society on the part of the Old Left, which believed it was winning the battle of democracy by perfecting the state, ended in the integration of the proletariat into the massified state. The *demos* of the massified society has reached through its endless massification a self-inversion into its opposite, the executive-judicial state.

Massification precludes mass politics. No pre-party formations are possible today, because no prefiguration is possible. We will be sects as long as we consider ourselves to already be the communist party that will conjure up a base from out of the mass. We will always end like the sorcerer’s apprentice, beholden to a power which we tried to command as masters. Mass democracy can only break itself out and move if it acts towards something beyond the *demos*. The revival of politics today will begin with negativity.

The party can only be the mouthpiece of a movement guiding it towards communism in language and political struggle. It can only be the affirmation made by a Great Refusal. There is no constituency which will guarantee the party; there is no technical trick that can flood us with numbers and take command over their powers. There can only be striking against the weakest links that bind us and striving towards the rays of light coming into our prison.

Many professional activists object to those who want to turn towards something beyond what’s right in front of us, because they believe that it paralyzes us from acting. They want us to limit our horizons to the narrow sphere of immediate action.

Many more of them disbelieve in the possibility of a free society, considering the unwashed masses incapable of self-emancipation and associating together as freely self-determining people. This is only legitimate if we assume that the point of the new society is total self-consciousness and self-possession, without any unconsciousness or strangeness. But that is the aim of perfection, and it is against the aim of freedom.

Holding onto the debts and obligations of the world as it already is keeps us from reaching towards something more. The new society doesn’t need to be prefigured by us in a blueprint. We don’t need everyone to agree in the single consensus of a program to organize ourselves; these agreements are only means for our self-organizing power. We only need to begin to organize our lives for our needs, and struggle against what disorganizes our efforts to begin to become the free participants of a society which organizes its own association.

³⁶ Karl Marx, “Critique of the Gotha Programme” (1875), in *Marx: Later Political Writings*, ed. Terrell Carver (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 215.

There is a boring and deadening tendency of democracy which imposes homogenization and conformity. We have to bring out the associating of the different, the enlivening thread in democracy. This life overcomes the need to think of itself in the limited mass-form of a people. Instead of the mass, a constellation, organizing itself in its own form as an infinitely complex interwoven network of relationships between unique points.

A constellation can only come forth in the night. The association of the unique can only take its form by passing through the measure of the people, communism must pass through the democratic struggle, making the split between society and the state. Such a split could revitalize self-activity from out of a prevailing condition of passivity, the territorial population with the state and capitalists as its only subjects.

Every step of real movement is more important than a dozen programmes. If, therefore, it was not possible — and the conditions of the item did not permit it — to go *beyond* the Eisenach programme, one should simply have concluded an agreement for action against the common enemy. But by drawing up a programme of principles (instead of postponing this until it has been prepared for by a considerable period of common activity) one sets up before the whole world landmarks by which it measures the level of the Party movement.³⁷

That common activity begins with something other than actionism alone. Actionism paralyzes the body by demanding immediate and absolute transformation. Compulsive actionism is the convulsion of atrophied and uncoordinated muscles, which have become bound too tightly in their strain to move deliberately and with growing power towards life. “Not to be confined by the greatest, yet to be contained within the smallest, is divine.”³⁸ |P

The dialectic of the core and the periphery

The surge of the Japanese Communist Party during the high-speed economic growth period, and limitations in its development

Morita Seiya

THE JAPANESE COMMUNIST PARTY (JCP), founded in 1922, is in its 103rd year in 2025. In 2023, the Party published the party history book *100 Years of the Japanese Communist Party* to commemorate its centenary.³⁹ However, it is a

³⁷ Karl Marx to W. Bracke (May 5, 1875), in *Marx & Engels Selected Works*, vol. 3 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1970), 11–12, <www.marxists.org>.

³⁸ Friedrich Hölderlin, *Hyperion and Selected Poems*, ed. Eric L. Santner, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Continuum, 1990), 1.

³⁹ See “JCP history book, ‘100 Years of the Japanese Communist Party’ published,” *Japan Press Weekly* (July 26 2023), <www.japan-press.co.jp>.

self-congratulatory book written by the JCP itself and does not analyze the history of the rise and fall of the Party in a social and class-based context.⁴⁰

In this piece, I will take on that challenge. But the history of the JCP is extremely complex and rich, and it is impossible to discuss its whole picture in this short essay, so I will choose to focus on one topic here: the JCP's big surge during Japan's high-speed economic growth period, and limitations in its development.

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The postwar history of the JCP begins with the unconditional surrender of Imperial Japan in August 1945 and the release of non-converted Communist leaders (including Miyamoto Kenji, Tokuda Kyūichi, and Shiga Yoshio) from prisons by the order of the Allied occupation General Headquarters of the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP)⁴¹ in October of the same year. In January of the following year, Nosaka Sanzō, who had been in exile in China, returned to Japan with hundreds of other Japanese communists, and the organizational activities of the JCP resumed in earnest.

Due to the fact that the majority of progressive intellectuals, including many Marxists, supported the imperialist wars and the imperial state from the mid-1930s, the political authority of the handful of Communist political prisoners who declined their conversion after the war rose dramatically. In addition, the political authority of Stalin's Soviet Union, which crushed Nazi Germany in World War II, also worked greatly in the Communist Party's favor. At first, the SCAP set the stage for the explosive growth of the postwar Leftist movement by releasing political prisoners and legalizing the JCP and labor unions. However, prompted by fears of the Left-wing movement's too rapid development and the start of the international Cold War, the SCAP began to take a so-called "reverse course" and attacked the Communist Party and militant labor-union movement fiercely through the Red Purge⁴² and various conspiracies.

Alongside this, Japanese monopoly capital succeeded in undermining militant labor movements by creating collaborationist unions within their companies. Most of the JCP members were laid off through the Red Purge. On the other hand, in the public sector, the majority of labor unions are affiliated with the Japan Socialist Party (JSP),⁴³ and so members of the Communist Party were driven into an overwhelming minority.

⁴⁰ The overall picture of the Party's 100-year history as seen by the party leadership is outlined in a speech by Shii Kazuo (then Party Chair), "Talking About the 100-Year History and Program of the Japanese Communist Party: Commemorative speech on the 100th Anniversary of the founding of the JCP" (September 17, 2022), <www.jcp.or.jp>.

⁴¹ 最高司令官。General Douglas MacArthur held the title of Supreme Commander, beginning on August 14, 1945.

⁴² The Red Purge (赤狩り) was carried out by the Japanese government and private corporations with the encouragement of the SCAP; tens of thousands of alleged members and supporters were removed from their jobs.

⁴³ The JSP (日本社会党) was founded in 1945 by members of pre-war proletarian parties, including the Shakai Taishūtō (Socialist Mass Party); it dissolved in 1996 to become the Social Democratic Party (社会民主党).

Despite such intensive suppression, the JCP itself was not destroyed, unlike before the war, even if the Party and the various movements under its influence were to a considerable extent marginalized. However, ironically, this marginalization actually created an opportunity to form the material foundations for its surge during the period of high growth in Japan.

We can see a similar phenomenon in the history of biological evolution. In a given era, the species that best adapt to the dominant environmental conditions of that time flourish and dominate the most advantageous and widest spaces. On the other hand, some species that lose this inter-species competition are driven to the periphery and undergo unique evolutionary changes in order to adapt to more disadvantageous and harsher environments. Later, when the dominant environmental conditions change drastically due to some major events, the species that were best adapted to the old environmental conditions of the past are unable to adapt to the new environment and become extinct, while the peripheral species that have survived in more unfavorable and harsh environments are able to adapt more rapidly to the new more favorable (for that species) environment, and go on to flourish in the next era.

Something like this also happened in the JCP's history during the high-speed economic growth period. Soon after the end of the Pacific Theater of World War II, the labor unions of major private companies became collaborationist enterprise unions, and their core activists became anti-communist. In addition, the labor unions of large public enterprises such as Japan National Railways, the Japan Post, and Nippon Telegraph and Telephone Public Corporation were mainly controlled by members of the JSP, so the JCP was forced to look for other bases for organizing. Their main targets were young, unorganized workers, schoolteachers, local and lower-level civil servants, university students, the small urban self-employed people, workers at small factories, housewives in newly developed residential areas, and employees of hospitals, clinics, and consumer cooperatives organized by the JCP members in urban areas.

These various classes and strata grew in number to an ever-increasing extent during the period of rapid economic growth. They were also plagued by many contradictions (excessive exploitation, low wages, public pollution, rising rents, urban alienation and poverty) due to Japan's too rapid economic growth and the conservative political regime. And new pacifist, democratic, and cultural desires were extremely strong among them. Under the political regime of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)⁴⁴ that depended on U.S. imperialism, the JCP actively worked on issues such as the campaign against nuclear weapons and U.S. military bases, the defense and realization of the post-war democratic Constitution, the anti-Vietnam War movement, and the improvement of the status of workers and farmers.

The mass organizations that the JCP actively organized included many cultural organizations such as the Labour Music Association (Rō-on) and workers' theater

⁴⁴ The LDP (自由民主党) was founded in 1955 through a merger of the Liberal Party and the Japan Democratic Party.

groups. In particular, Rō-on grew to become a large organization with 500,000 members at one point. The most important mass organization affiliated with the JCP was the Democratic Youth League (Minsei),⁴⁵ a youth organization open to members aged 15–30 that was also active in education, culture, recreation, as well as in political activities. These organizations were in response to the cultural needs and desire for social interaction of the huge numbers of young male and female workers who had moved from rural areas to the cities. These organizations and their spheres of activity provided them with a new sense of community — one that was more open, sex-equal, and democratic, replacing the patriarchal, backward, and closed communities to which they had belonged in their villages.

Also, the JCP placed emphasis on neighborhood activities in newly developed urban housing complexes (*danchi*), actively addressing the everyday-life demands of young couples with young children working in small and medium-sized companies as well as in local governments. These activities encouraged mutual aid and political consciousness-raising within communities under Japan’s postwar low-welfare system, and led to a rapid increase in the number of local JCP legislators.

In contrast to the fact that the core of the labor movement in Western social democratic or communist parties was large-scale labor unions in private and public corporations, the JCP was largely excluded from these cores, and marginalized both socially and politically. Therefore, it sought out different political and class bases, evolving into an organizational form that was suited to these new bases, and this became a major advantage during the period of rapid economic growth. We can name this phenomenon a “dialectic of the core and the periphery.” The dual organizational expansion policy of the JCP under the leadership of Miyamoto Kenji, namely the expansion of the Party itself and the expansion of its affiliated mass organizations, was a development strategy that it had cultivated in order to expand and maintain its influence without relying on large labor unions in the private and public sectors.

Therefore, even though, during Japan’s high-speed economic growth, workers and labor unions of large private corporations were increasingly incorporated into the harsh control of corporate management, the JCP was able to continually expand its political and organizational influence, because it found a rich material and political foundations in the periphery and evolved into its organizational form suitable for organizing these elements.

Moreover, this was also the key to why the Party was able to maintain its organizational strength for a long time, even during the period of low growth from the mid-1970s onward and the wave of neoliberalism that swept in from the mid-80s, which led to the decline of labor movements not only in the private sector but also in the public sector. While the JSP crumbled under attacks aimed at dismantling public sector labor movements — such as the destruction of the National Railway Workers’ Union (Kokurō) following the privatization and break-up of the Japanese National Railways

⁴⁵ Minsei (民主青年同盟) was founded in 1923.

(Kokutetsu) in the mid-80s — rapidly shifting to the Right and ultimately declining, the JCP was able to maintain its strong organization by relying on its own peripheral social bases.

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If we compare this policy of the JCP with that of the New Left, which developed explosively in the 1960s and early 70s and then rapidly declined, its relatively different characteristics will become more apparent.

The New Left grew by excessively adapting to the unique environment of universities, which had been opened up to only a handful of wealthy people during the prewar era, but which exploded in student numbers during the postwar era as universities became democratized. Since the New Left's line was extremely suitable for the period when universities were politically radicalizing, its various sects temporarily gained organizational successes that surpassed those of the JCP at Japan's major universities.

However, the New Left's strategy soon came to a dead end as the students became increasingly conservative from the late 1970s. The militant and violent style of activity of the New Left was only able to attract a small number of young people who were extremely rebellious towards society. As students became more conservative, the number of such people rapidly dwindled. Universities replace their entire membership in just four years, so their organizational base in universities could disappear quickly. Furthermore, New Left sects were waging violent conflicts with each other here and there, so they quickly lost their already weak mass base.

The JCP also frequently engaged in violent conflict with New Left sects during the period when the students were politically radicalized, but for the JCP this was merely a temporary tactic, whereas for the New Left, the use of force was a strategy and even their identity. The New Left completely rejected the Socialist Party and the Communist Party because of their parliamentarianism, so they had to continue to take violent action even if the means became increasingly unsuitable in a later period. After losing their mass base in universities, they sought a sphere of activity in the Sanrizuka movement, which was gaining momentum in opposition to the construction of the new airport Narita, and in various small anti-discrimination movements, and eventually this developed into an extreme situation where members of opposing organizations were killing each other.

The extremity of actions taken by the New Left can be explained by the narrowness of their social base. Having only a specific foundation of politically radicalized students (particularly male students), the New Left shared the same fate; namely, their temporary rise and rapid fall. When even radicalized students went to work for private companies, they quickly adapted to harsh management climates and generally became conservative. Due to the extremity of the gap between relatively liberal universities and the overly totalitarian order of large private companies, the student rebellions at universities in the 1960s and 70s ultimately did not lead to the liberalization of society as a whole, and ended in a bloody internal conflict between extreme sects.

The JCP also sought an organizational base among the universities that had become radicalized in the 1960s and 70s, but for the JCP this was just one of many social bases, and so they did not excessively adapt to their radical sentiments. The JCP's main social base was still the social periphery, which consisted of people of all ages and sexes from various classes, and the majority of them were non-violent and oriented towards steady grassroots activities. Therefore, even after the students at the universities became generally conservative, it was still possible to maintain organizational foundations based on these peripheral strata.

Another major difference between the New Left and the JCP related to political intergenerational continuation. The New Left, which relied solely on the radicalism of a particular group at a particular time, was unable to pass on the politics of their generation to their children. In contrast, the JCP placed importance on intergenerational succession, and as part of this objective, they published a large number of diverse cultural contributions (ranging from sports and music to entertainment, novels, and manga) in their newspapers, and edited them so that they could be enjoyed by children as well as adults, and by women as well as men. In particular, the weekly newspaper *Sunday Akahata* (*Akahata Nichiyō-ban*), which was first published by the JCP in 1959, was designed to be enjoyable not only for supporters of the Party, but also for a wide range of the general public that was made up of people of all ages. The circulation of this paper steadily increased, reaching over 3 million copies in the 1970s.

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As we have seen, the JCP has expanded and maintained its organization by relying on its broad and diverse peripheral strata rather than on core workers belonging to large private and public enterprises, or on radicalized students at universities. However, even these strata had inevitable limits.

The wave of young workers who poured into the cities from the countryside came to a standstill in the second half of the 1970s, due to the shift to low growth in the Japanese economy triggered by the oil shock of 1973 and the large-scale public works policies pursued by the LDP government in rural areas. The number of local government employees also began to decline from the 80s onwards due to austerity and neoliberal policies. Numbers of workers in small factories and the self-employed also followed the same course of decline in the context of low economic growth and neoliberalism. As the incomes of middle-class workers increased during the period of high growth, they began to buy detached houses and condominiums in the suburbs, and traditional local communities began to decline. Furthermore, the younger generation gradually integrated into the dominant bourgeois culture through television and popular magazines. (The internet in the 21st century further integrated the younger generation into the dominant bourgeois culture.) In this way, the peripheral classes and strata on which the JCP was based clearly began to stagnate or decline.

The decline in the Party's organizational strength is most clearly shown in the change in the number of copies of its official newspapers (a daily publication and a

weekly). It reached a peak of around 3.5 million copies in 1980, but began to gradually decline, falling below 2 million in 2000 and finally below 1 million from 2019.

Nevertheless, because the organizational core of the JCP, primarily composed of younger generations acquired in the 1960s and 70s, existed on a scale of several hundred thousand members, the Party has managed to retain a certain political foothold even today, despite experiencing organizational stagnation in the 1980s and 90s and a decline in the 21st century. This stands in contrast to the JSP (now the Social Democratic Party), which is in a state of near-total political collapse.

However, the younger generation that was organized into the Party primarily in the 1960s and 70s (the so-called Baby Boomers and its slightly younger generation) has now become fully elderly amid the overall decline in birth rates and the aging of the Japanese population. Neither Fuwa Tetsuzō, who succeeded Miyamoto Kenji, nor Shii Kazuo, who succeeded Fuwa, were able to devise a new strategy that would enable the Party to make a new organizational advance in Japan's long declining era. Now, in this situation, the Shii leadership (most recently Tamura Tomoko) pursues the organizational expansion policy of the Miyamoto era again, even though the social conditions that formed the basis for its success have already disappeared. This holding strategy will not succeed.

In the West, too, the labor movement has been pushed back by neoliberalism, but, compared to Japan, traditional labor unions are still going strong, and the Western Left is still able to rely on them. Furthermore, since the 1960s, the emergence of a large number of highly educated people, their general liberalization, and their rise to socially dominant positions provided the Western Left with a new social base (although this also brought about another serious problem of the Western Left becoming elitist and distancing itself from the masses). However, as mentioned earlier, core workers in Japan are overly conservative, and the traditional labor-union movement is extremely collaborative and conservative, so it does not form the basis of the Left. On the other hand, it is true that a mass of highly educated people has emerged in Japan, but this social class is small here compared to the West, and in general they have not become very liberal (or if they are liberal, it's neoliberal), so they have not become a new basis for the Left.⁴⁶

The above factors have led to the current situation in which the traditionally conservative ruling party, the LDP, remains strong despite the severe circumstances of Japan's long-term economic decline and the increasing impoverishment of workers, while the liberal and workers' opposition parties remain remarkably weak.

The JCP has a stronger organizational foundation compared to liberal opposition parties, but its supporter base is extremely narrow. On the other hand, the liberal parties have much broader supporter bases than the JCP but suffer from weak organizational structures. Therefore, for a time, an electoral cooperation strategy between

⁴⁶ See Morita Seiya, "Japan's 2021 general election and its crisis of democracy," *Links International Journal of Socialist Renewal* (January 21, 2022), <links.org.au>.

the liberal opposition parties and the JCP was pursued in an attempt to compensate for each other's weaknesses. However, this ultimately failed. This was because the organizational strength of the JCP had already waned, and opposition candidates jointly endorsed by the parties failed to gain organizational support from the JCP great enough to outweigh lost public support as a result of having cooperated with the JCP.

Meanwhile, the once-powerful LDP has been on a gradual decline since the assassination of its charismatic leader, Abe Shinzō, in 2022 by a disillusioned young man.⁴⁷ As a result, the JCP, the liberal opposition parties, and the conservative ruling party are all currently in a state of chaotic uncertainty. In these circumstances, there is a good chance that Right-wing populist parties will rise to prominence, just as they have in Europe.⁴⁸ At the moment, this is still only in its embryonic stages in Japan. However, if the major conservative and liberal parties continue to decline, who knows what might happen?

The JCP must make a concerted effort to organize people in a progressive direction who are left behind by the major parties: the huge number of non-regular workers, non-elite women, poor farmers, small shopkeepers, and non-elite immigrant workers. These people are far more dispersed, far more isolated, and far more difficult to organize than the younger generation who moved collectively from rural areas to cities for employment in Japan's high-speed economic growth period. However, these are precisely the people who, if left unattended, could be absorbed into Right-wing populism, but also who, if the Left finds the right means and methods to engage with them, could become the driving force for a new progressive social change. |P

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⁴⁷ See Morita Seiya, "When the chickens came home to roost: Behind the assassination of Shinzo Abe," *Links International Journal of Socialist Renewal* (July 23, 2022), <links.org.au>.

⁴⁸ See Morita Seiya, "Right-wing populism and historical fascism: Traverso's new book on postfascism," *Links International Journal of Socialist Renewal* (July 18, 2021), <links.org.au>.

DESIGNERS

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Chris Mansour

WEB EDITOR

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SOCIAL MEDIA EDITOR

Gabe Gottfried

DISTRIBUTION

Erica Gamble

Diaz Mathis

CHAPTER COORDINATOR

Ceci Chang

Statement of purpose

Taking stock of the universe of positions and goals that constitutes leftist politics today, we are left with the disquieting suspicion that a deep commonality underlies the apparent variety: What exists today is built upon the desiccated remains of what was once possible.

In order to make sense of the present, we find it necessary to disentangle the vast accumulation of positions on the Left and to evaluate their saliency for the possible reconstitution of emancipatory politics in the present. Doing this implies a reconsideration of what is meant by the Left.

Our task begins from what we see as the general disenchantment with the present state of progressive politics. We feel that this disenchantment cannot be cast off by sheer will, by simply “carrying on the fight,” but must be addressed and itself made an object of critique. Thus we begin with what immediately confronts us.

The *Platypus Review* is motivated by its sense that the Left is disoriented. We seek to be a forum among a variety of tendencies and approaches on the Left—not out of a concern with inclusion for its own sake, but rather to provoke disagreement and to open shared goals as sites of contestation. In this way, the recriminations and accusations arising from political disputes of the past may be harnessed to the project of clarifying the object of leftist critique.

The *Platypus Review* hopes to create and sustain a space for interrogating and clarifying positions and orientations currently represented on the Left, a space in which questions may be raised and discussions pursued that would not otherwise take place. As long as submissions exhibit a genuine commitment to this project, all kinds of content will be considered for publication.

Submission Guidelines

Articles will typically range in length from 750–4,500 words, but longer pieces will be considered. Please send article submissions and inquiries about this project to editor.platypusreview@gmail.com. All submissions should conform to the *Chicago Manual of Style*.

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About the Platypus Affiliated Society

The Platypus Affiliated Society, established in December 2006, organizes reading groups, public fora, research and journalism focused on problems and tasks inherited from the “Old” (1920s-30s), “New” (1960s-70s) and post-political (1980s-90s) Left for the possibilities of emancipatory politics today.

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Nina Power, Lucy Sparling, W. Xiao & Morita Seiya
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